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THE PARENT PROBLEM¹

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The real parent problem is how to secure better parents and grandparents, and this is what the schools are always working at—for future generations. The present generation, alas, is obliged to take their parents as they find them. Our question is the function of the school in the development of character, and, more narrowly, the parents in relation to the development of character in the schools.

At the start let us remember that the child, when delivered at the school door, represents a particular heredity modified by a particular environment. Our formula is $A = xy$, in which y , the home environment, remains fairly constant during the school years and is an effective force seven days in the week. Sensible of this fact, we are sometimes inclined to overlook the other factor, x , the heredity. According to the conclusions of Mr. Galton, a child's inherited qualities are derived one-half from its parents and one-half from earlier ancestors. This means that the qualities of the parents are likely to be those of the child, apart from the environment. It means also that they are, again apart from the environment, quite as likely to be those of grandparents or other forbears.

This latter fact is, not infrequently, puzzling to teachers, who can find nothing in the child to suggest the parents. They estimate the child at their valuation of the father and mother, and find themselves wholly deceived. They forget the other half of the inheritance to which the child may hark back. Stupid children are born of gifted parents, while a brilliant intellect may appear in a humble home. Teachers are thus led to unjust estimates and practical conclusions, applying social or family standards, instead of taking each child at his face value. It is one of the glories of the American public school that this injustice is so infrequent and its democracy so genuine. In the classroom of the public school, at least, the child is given the

¹ Read at the Conference at Dartmouth College, May, 1905.

one chance of life to be squarely measured in mind and character, which, together, make up scholarship. The moment the school doors are closed after him the fatal social standard is upon him.

We have seen that the inheritance of the child is one-half from his immediate parents and one-half from beyond them, and that this inheritance is from birth under the influence of the home environment. Now, it is not sufficiently realized that this environment itself is likely to resemble the inheritance, since it is largely made up of parental qualities which the child shares as a birthright, and of qualities of brother and sister similarly shared. The environment pulls in the same direction with more than half the heredity. There is a deadly inevitableness and monotony about the whole thing. Drunken parents mean a drunken home; stupid parents imply a home that is without intellectual stimulus. On the other hand, intelligent parents create a home of some culture, and fine character in father and mother must surely organize an uplifting home environment. Accordingly, parents are the symbols, or brief expression, of the most that may be expected of the child as he enters the new environment of the school. Further, that for which they stand continues to dominate the life of each pupil for the entire school period, though in lessening degree, since, as the social relations of each child widen with the years, the home environment becomes less important, and among the new social relations those of the school are, for the most plastic period of life, the most significant. If the child is carried but a little way in the school course, the school can count for but little in the total; and this is why such observers as Mrs. Josephine Lowell almost despair of the school as a formative force in comparison with the home—a conviction which all charity workers have had impressed upon their minds. But the opportunity of the school is still there; to afford a new environment to all children, and a better opportunity to some whose heredity and home surroundings are unfavorable; in short, to recognize personality and develop it.

It has already been suggested that scholarship is mostly a function of two variables, mind and character. A third, the purely physical, should be mentioned in passing. For this the school gymnasium, the playground, and, if necessary, the wholesome school lunch at

noontime provide. May it not be that this third element has been too much lost sight of in our educational system, below the college?

The public school has been charged with neglect of character, the moral element. This is the view of the Roman Catholic church, and there has been, perhaps still is, considerable justification for the reproach. Such a conference as this we are holding indicates some measure of repentance and recognition of the truth that the training of the mind and heart must go together, that most boys and girls fail and drop by the wayside rather from moral than from purely intellectual defects. If it were in order, it would be profitable to discuss the ethical reactions of intellectual discipline; but our topic is rather the reverse: the way in which the qualities of the parents may be utilized in the training of the schools.

A rude classification of parents from this point of view would be into three groups: those who thwart such efforts, those who are indifferent, and those who are helpful. This may seem at first sight like classifying all parents into good, bad, and indifferent; and it is, if the point of view is their relation to the moral aims of the teachers, but not as descriptive of the essential qualities of the parents themselves. Many good fathers and mothers are bad from the teacher's point of view, and sometimes the reverse is true.

First, then, as to those who thwart the moral efforts and influences of the school. Note the distinction between efforts and influences. At the risk of incurring the charge of treason to the aim of this conference, we seriously doubt the efficacy of the distinctly moral efforts of the school, in comparison with its indirect moral influences. In the first place, a large measure of letting alone is good for all creatures, and chiefly for the young, inasmuch as it is a condition of wholesome moral development. In the second place, the attempts of the instructor to teach goodness must always shatter upon the ineradicable aversion of the child for "goody-goody talk," and the equal hospitality of the young mind to all forms of contrary suggestions.

There is no overestimating, on the other hand, the influence of simple goodness in the person of the teacher. High character, exhibited day by day, patience, transparent purity of life, fairness, fidelity to duty, firmness, and kindness afford the only fit atmosphere

for the growth of like high qualities in the pupils; and the same is true of the relation of pupils to each other. These are not the moral efforts, but the moral influences of the school, which are thwarted by three classes of parents.

First and most obviously are the vicious parents who do two very ill turns to their children, in setting them bad copies for imitation in the home, and in destroying the child's self-respect and family pride. The first wrong is too obvious for long comment. The depraved, drunken, or dishonest father and mother, almost by parental mandate, compel like qualities in their unfortunate children, unless happily a vigorous contrary suggestion dominates their development, so that drink and vice and dishonesty become loathsome. But what of the child's loss of self-respect, and the family shame that humiliates and forces to apology or reckless abandon? Loyalty to parents and family is one of the most natural and finest traits of childhood, but goodness, to the child from such a home, is treason, and for the teacher to champion virtue is to inculcate domestic anarchism. The only possible chance lies in awakening the self-respect of the child and utilizing family affection (which possesses singular vitality), rather than in indiscriminate censure and denunciation. But only the rare child rises from under such a weight of the past and the present, and the rarer teacher knows how to help them to do it.

Stupid parents present a trying moral problem, for the heredity of their children is likely to be a feeble endowment, and the intellectual problem of the deficient and semi-deficient is also a moral problem. To say, "He is too intelligent to be bad," as we often do, is to imply that mental grasp is likely to show itself also in those relations of life which we call moral, and its lack in moral perverseness. The child is punished for what is, primarily, stupidity, when we should try to understand and enlighten him, as we would if we appreciated better the defects of the family stock. Probably many children with these characteristics could be saved morally as well as mentally by the timely discovery of some manual aptitude which would arouse interest and awaken thereby dormant faculties. This the new curriculum recognizes, and none too early in our educational history.

The ignorant or unappreciative parents confuse moral issues in

three ways. In the first place, they may keep the child too much at work or withdraw him too early from school. This is destructive of school ambition and likely to injure the moral fiber. The handicap is so great as to discourage the child in all the ranges of his activity; for the child's mind is not in compartments, and the spirit of "What's the use" soon pervades the moral atmosphere. "Of course, she can get her lessons. Her father is a professor and knows everything, so he can help her all she wants. It isn't fair," said a little girl whose parents were ignorant French Canadians. And it is not fair, but a teacher's insight and sympathy may prevent intellectual discouragement from becoming moral indifference, although we cannot get away from the family entanglement any more than Plato could.

In the second place, such parents fail to recognize the peculiar tastes and capacities of their children, and force them into academic or practical channels, as the case may be, for which they are not fitted. The training is misdirected, and the damage is, as before, to the whole child. Sometimes this is among the poor, from severe necessity; sometimes among the rich, whose incapable sons should be using their hands in honest toil and not abusing the college curriculum. State universities, scholarships, and a democratic public, quick to recognize talent, help the discerning teacher in the first instance; but there seems little remedy for the latter trouble.

In the third place, we find the foolish and indulgent parents who lavish pocket-money for candy, or finery, or college allowances; or those who permit social diversions in the high school to interfere with the health and well-being of the boys and girls, and baffle the most ambitious teacher. Others are afraid of the public school, and make weaklings of their children, in spite of the admitted fact that, under normal conditions, the discipline of the public school is most salutary, and necessary in a democratic society. Some fond mothers and arbitrary fathers attempt to thwart this discipline, to the injury of their offspring and vexation of the teacher.

Our second class, the indifferent parents, may be more summarily considered. They are usually of no particular mark, and do not care or wish to be bothered. They leave school to the authorities and experts (a trait in which there is much to commend), and are surprised if the product is not according to their expectations. These

are they who cannot be appealed to by the college administration, because they send their sons to college for the reason given by Mr. Dooley: "I don't want him around the house for the next four years." They are unwilling to take pains to help their children just when most needing help, either with their studies or morals, being too greatly engrossed in business or pleasure to co-operate with the school. Many fathers and mothers are not much at home and do not know their children. The home life is deficient, too, for another reason. About twenty-five million people in the United States live in cities, and of these nine million are under fifteen years of age. For most of these home is either a tenement or a flat, far from the green fields and woods, leaving them more without the companionship of parents than the country child is. They must live in the street and find questionable amusement without the family circle. There are intellectual offsets to this, but not many upon the moral side. The characteristics of cities are always a reckless individualism, as that of a peasant population is a sturdy family solidarity.

Our parent problem is really not one, but differs widely under varying social conditions, and between country and city.

We have but a word, and a word of tribute, for those parents who are helpful to the teacher in matters of character. They count for righteousness chiefly in three ways. First, by simple goodness. The inheritance of the child is good, the home is good. The admirable mother and the upright father save their children naturally and almost inevitably. In this fact alone there is a sufficient sanction for goodness; in the father and mother, as they regard their children, and in the children, as they see the reflexes of their conduct upon their parents. The Chinese are said to base their social structure upon just this sense of family solidarity, and possibly we ourselves are losing it. Secondly, such parents count by their sacrifices, which awaken in the child the feeling of gratitude and hold him steady. Gratitude has great expulsive force. It purifies, and to it appeal may be confidently made. The sacrifices of the poor to keep their children in school are beyond all praise, as are the sacrifices of those of slender income to send the boy or girl to high school or college. Thirdly, they co-operate with the school. The good parent is the teacher's best friend, helping to sustain the school discipline, to correct obvious faults, and

to sustain the flagging ambition. A legitimate amount of social life, in connection with the school, may lead to a better understanding between teacher and parents, and in many schools the teacher should visit the homes, or have open hours when parents are welcome. In all events, self-respecting teachers recognize the fact that they are large forces in the life of the community, as the community in turn admits in the liberal support of education through taxation.

Finally, the wise parent is needed to counteract the mischievous tendencies in school and college life. For there are such, although the sum-total of their influences is wholesome. Perhaps the fault of the school most worthy of note is vulgarity. Speech and conduct are on too low a key. Language deteriorates into slang and empty repetitions. Manners become rude, and native refinement becomes blunted. Popular taste suffers, and art decays. The teacher should never be guilty here, whatever be the home influences of these intrusted to their care.

In college the trouble is unreality, almost at the opposite pole. The atmosphere of the college is traditionally exclusive and fosters artificial standards. But pedantry, or priggishness, or recklessness does not usually survive the transfer to home and real life.

There are two family conditions when a tragedy may be looked for in the life of the child, as the observant teacher well knows. The first is when one parent is of one of our types, and the other of another. This means to the child discord, cross-purposes, confusion, and possibly a home broken by divorce or separation. The second tragedy occurs where the heredity of the child seems to skip father and mother, and the waif is out of sympathy with them and with the home. In talents or in tastes and character there is misunderstanding, and appreciation is invariably absent. The teacher must often be the mediator, and the one essential quality demanded is insight.

It would be interesting to speak of the school in its reaction upon the home, of parents as influenced by child, teacher, and school; but for this there is no time. Perhaps enough has been said to impress our conviction of the dignity of the teacher's mission in the American community. In terms of social service, none rank higher. The faithful teacher belongs to the army of civic heroes.